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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2256

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 002801

STATE FOR NEA/MAG (MHARRIS)

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM TS

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PRESENTS CREDENTIALS TO FOREIGN
MINISTER, GETS THE ABDALLAH TREATMENT

REF: TUNIS 2743

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b); (d)

¶1. (C/NF) Summary: Ambassador Godec presented a copy of his credentials to Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelwaheb Abdallah on November 18. In an hour long meeting, Ambassador and FM discussed a range of issues, but clearly most important to Abdallah was the point he made the week before to Charge (reftel) that the GOT's restriction of Embassy officers' access to NGOs was minor and should not rise to the level of Washington. Ambassador responded that freedom of association and expression, and freedom of access for Embassy officers, were of great importance to the United States. Throughout the conversation, Abdallah returned several times to this subject, at times emotionally. It was unusual that Abdallah turned a courtesy call into such a lengthy discussion. We believe that the action by Washington officials to raise the matter was noted by the presidency, causing Abdallah some discomfort. End summary.

¶2. (U) Ambassador Godec presented a copy of his credentials to Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelwaheb Abdallah on November 18. Tunisian protocol allows an ambassador who has presented a copy of credentials to the foreign minister to act as ambassador even before presenting credentials to the chief of state. Since President Ben Ali only receives ambassadors' credentials twice a year, this is a useful mechanism allowing ambassadors to meet with everyone except the Presidency as soon as they see the foreign minister. Abdallah explained that he called the Ambassador in so quickly (three days' after Ambassador's arrival) because he was leaving the country for a week and did not want the Ambassador to have to wait until his return.

¶3. (C/NF) Though the meeting was advertised as a fifteen-minute "courtesy call," Abdallah soon launched into what was really on his mind. In a conversation that echoed what he told Charge the previous week (reftel), Abdallah complained that the embassy should not have made an issue out of being prevented by the police from meeting human rights activists (the Tunisian League for Human Rights -- LTDH), and this misunderstanding should have never risen to the level of Washington officials (A/S Welch to Abdallah, and U/S Burns and NSC Abrams to Tunisian Ambassador Hachana). Abdallah returned to this subject several times during the conversation, noting that the United States and Tunisia are "allies" and "strategic partners" and -- surprisingly -- that "There has never been a time when we did not support US positions, because we believe US policies are just." Ambassador responded to each of these torrents that freedom of association and expression in Tunisia, as well as freedom of access for Embassy Officers, would always be of great importance to the United States.

¶4. (C/NF) Comment: It was unusual that Foreign Minister Abdallah turned an introductory courtesy call by the Ambassador into a sometimes emotional plea that the Embassy stop making the LTDH incidents an issue. Of particular note is that Abdallah -- in a first for a GOT official speaking on the record -- implicitly admitted that the Ministry of Interior was behind the restrictions on the Embassy's work. He said that his ministry was there to help the Embassy navigate the complicated Tunisian bureaucracy, and sighed

that ministries were jealous of their turf. By way of example, he said, "The Ministry of Interior insists on its prerogatives, even if this creates problems for the work of other ministries, like Foreign Affairs."

¶5. (C/NF) Comment continued: The meeting with Abdallah underscores again that the GOT is more comfortable discussing foreign policy (Israel-Palestine issues, Libya, Iran, or terrorism) than it is debating domestic subjects. As Abdallah put it, "Please understand the important difference between little things and big things that count in relations between states. Small problems should not become big problems." We believe that officials in the Presidency have taken note of Washington raising the LTDH incidents and told Abdallah to get the Embassy back in line. End comment.

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